

Lawsuit accuses sheep ranchers of fixing wages

Complaint also claims ranchers made unlawful wage deductions

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

A new lawsuit accuses ranchers who rely on foreign guest workers of colluding to unlawfully fix wages for sheep herders at artificially low levels.

The complaint was filed against the Western Range Association and Mountain Plains Agricultural Service — which help ranchers hire employees using the H-2A guest worker visa process — by former sheep herders represented by Towards Justice, a law firm representing workers.

Several ranches that participate in the H-2A program are also named as defendants in the complaint.

“The result of this price fixing conspiracy or conspiracies is absurdly low wages for

all shepherds, the exclusion of most American workers from the shepherd labor market, and the importation of vulnerable foreign workers,” the lawsuit claims.

Capital Press was unable to reach representatives of the Western Range Association or the Mountain Plains Agricultural Service as of press time.

According to the complaint, ranchers associated with the two organizations generally offer wages exactly at the minimum floor levels

set by the U.S. Department of Labor, thereby eliminating competition and discouraging domestic workers from applying for sheep herder positions.

Sheep herders are paid about \$750-\$800 per month across most of the West, though those in Oregon and California earn \$1,277 and \$1,422 per month, respectively, the lawsuit said.

When domestic workers don’t fill the positions, the associations recruit foreign workers through the H-2A program — as a result, a vast

majority of sheep herders are from overseas, the complaint said.

“In a competitive market, and absent the price fixing, ranchers would offer a higher wage to U.S. workers than they do H-2A workers to account for the additional cost of bringing an H-2A worker to the country,” the lawsuit claims.

“H-2A workers are more costly to employers because, pursuant to the H-2A regulations, they must be reimbursed by their employers for travel to and from the

place of recruitment in their home country.”

The complaint also alleges that ranchers affiliated with the two organizations illegally deducted the cost of travel, lodging, criminal background checks and other expenses that primarily benefit the employer.

The lawsuit seeks certification as a class action, which would allow other sheep herders to join in the case, as well as triple the amount of damages allegedly sustained by harmed workers.

Study shows excessive foreign farm support costing U.S. wheat

China, India, Turkey, Brazil highlighted

By GEORGE PLAVERN
EO Media Group

Excessive farm subsidies in several advanced developing countries might be costing U.S. wheat farmers nearly \$1 billion per year in revenue, according to the results of a new study released Monday.

The study, paid for by the U.S. Wheat Associates and National Association of Wheat Growers, focuses specifically on China, India, Turkey and Brazil, where the industry groups say governments are supporting domestic wheat production at levels much higher than what they agreed to as members of the World Trade Organization.

By over subsidizing production, those countries end up with a surplus of domestic wheat that competes with U.S. and global exports, said Dalton Henry, director of policy for the Wheat Associates. The result is a distorted trade market with artificially deflated prices.

About half of all U.S. wheat is exported, including a whopping 85-90 percent of Oregon’s crop — the majority of which is grown in Umatilla and Morrow counties.



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

A new study, paid for by U.S. Wheat Associates and National Association of Wheat Growers, says excessive farm subsidies in several advanced developing countries might be costing U.S. wheat farmers nearly \$1 billion per year in revenue.

“What other countries do has a big and significant impact on the revenue of U.S. wheat growers,” Henry said. “I think the overall total loss in revenue seen to these programs has been surprising.”

The goal of the study, conducted by agricultural economist Dermot Hayes with Iowa State University, was to analyze what would happen to U.S. wheat if domestic support in China, India, Turkey

and Brazil were removed. Results showed U.S. production would increase by more than 53 million bushels, and farm gate prices would increase by nearly 30 cents per bushel.

As the largest world consumer of wheat, China’s subsidies have had a particularly compelling effect, Henry said. China currently supports 47 percent of the value of its domestic production, far exceeding its agreement of 8.5

percent under the World Trade Organization.

Hayes’ figures show U.S. wheat growers could capture an additional \$548 million annually if subsidies were eliminated in China, along with \$358 million in India, \$172 million in Turkey and \$23 million in Brazil. The study indicated the four countries together would increase imports by nearly 10 million metric tons, with the U.S. in position

to capture 20 percent of that growth.

And, even with the changes, Hayes argues China, India and Turkey would still be 90 percent self-sufficient in wheat production.

U.S. Wheat Associates is asking the countries to abide by their commitments to the World Trade Organization as the latest Doha Round of negotiations continues among members, Henry said. In-

creasing subsidies likely stems from political pressure within the countries to increase food security, he said, though it actually drives up the cost for consumers by reducing competitive imports from America and other trade partners.

“I think part of it is just raising awareness of the issue,” Henry said. “It’s definitely not an easy answer, and not one we expect to be solved within the next several months.”

Brett Blakenship, an Eastern Washington wheat farmer and current president of the National Association of Wheat Growers, said the countries’ “market-distorting policies” are in part to blame for wheat prices falling 30 percent over a year ago, hitting family farms especially hard.

It’s already been a tough production year for Oregon wheat, with drought expected to cut into yields by roughly 15 percent statewide. Blake Rowe, CEO of the Oregon Wheat Growers League, said soft white wheat prices have fared relatively well compared to other types of wheat, but have still slipped on the export market.

All farmers can do is continue to produce a quality product and weigh in to the government on trade issues, Rowe said.



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Colfax, Wash., farmer Randy Sueess sits in his shop Sept. 10 in the middle of some of his items up for auction. Sueess is retiring after 30 years of farming.

Retiring wheat leader preps for auction

Sueess ponders life after farming

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

COLFAX, Wash. — It hasn’t sunk in yet for Randy Sueess that he’s farmed his last harvest.

“I think when I see the guys out seeding my farm land, that’s going to be pretty hard,” he said while sitting in his shop north of Colfax, Wash., one sunny morning in early September.

Sueess, a leader in the Washington wheat community, has been too busy to think about

it, getting ready for an auction of his equipment 10:30 a.m. Sept. 23 on his farm.

“I’m cleaning out a hundred years of accumulation,” he said. “This was my grandpa’s and my dad’s farm. They grew up in pretty poor times. I think they kept every nut and bolt and everything they possibly could think of that they thought they may use again, and they never did.”

Items include two tractors, two cultivators, a disc, a harrow cart, a service rig, a seed truck and tools, toys from Sueess’ childhood and antique farm equipment. Some of the larger items are also up for bid in an online auction.

Sueess decided to retire after 30 years for medical reasons. Long hours on the tractor and combine bothered one of his legs.

“The sad part is giving up some of the leases, because those leases have also been in the family for three generations,” he said.

Most leases will be picked up by the father-son team taking over Sueess’ land.

Sueess has long been an advocate for the wheat and agriculture industry. He represented Whitman County on the Washington Grain Commission and its predecessor, the Washington Wheat Commission, for 11 years.

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